

# INTRODUCTION: MOBILISATIONS, INTERVENTIONS, AND CULTURAL POLICY

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The relationship between political and social activism and the University has been repeatedly problematised. Posed in terms of a division between the 'scholar' and the 'activist', a division that often runs through the very social experience of subjects engaged in these endeavours, there have been multiple scholar-activist attempts to explode these categories and/or 'blur' the boundary between knowledge production within the University and knowledge production outside of its boundaries. This has been a double movement that has sought a confluence as well as a troubling of the categories of so-called 'theory' and 'practice.' The proliferation of scholarly work about, for and with social movements continues to pose the question of how to transgress the scholar-activist impasse in ways that overcome the frustrations encountered in the cul-de-sac of reified categories and identities and the possibilities of a post-disciplined world. This research thread is situated at this nexus, seeking an engagement with the political questions of knowledge production in ways that are relevant to social movement(s) and to processes of social change more broadly.

Notably, social movements are themselves entities whose own boundaries and definitions are blurred or hazy at best; the blurred line between research and action also derives and is related to the multiple and blurred identities of those seeking to engage movements as researchers and activists themselves. This multiplicity of subject positions and knowledges evokes the image of a network of knowledge production. Forms of networked 'horizontal' - not to say lateral - organising have been of interest to scholars and activists making the connections between the multiplicities of struggling subjects & communities, campaigns & organisations, at local, national and transnational levels. Yet, there is still work to be done in understanding the possibilities for the cross-pollination of ideas and interventions, and the openings for transformative praxis. Epistemologically engaging and traversing these networks raises key methodological questions as well.

The commodity form chases us from one site of production or struggle to the next and privatisation has and continues to discipline knowledge production in specific ways. The University, the so-called 'public sphere', art & culture, and indeed social change activism render productive for capital the creative capacities and the struggles of living labour. Inquiring into the political economy of these processes, this research thread asks what disciplining effects such attempts have and how epistemologies of social change are reconfigured and struggled against in the exploitation of labour. In the contemporary University in countries such as the UK, an interest in militant or co-research encounters an increased demand for university departments to demonstrate the 'impact' of their research and its connections to practice. There is potential in this encounter if new possibilities for intervention and for building collective power/knowledge can be prised open. At the same time, it can also lead to new rounds of co-optation and pacification of knowledge production. Recent times have also seen a growing interest in the artist as researcher and research-led art as well as a renewed discussion on the intersections between art, culture and politics. As social subjects - whether our activities take place primarily in one cultural universe or another, whether this is the (post-)public sphere, the University, a gallery, or whether as part of a social movement campaign - our research must be critically approached precisely in how it is embedded within the

multiple networks of social relations in which we exist. A methodology that takes this seriously must necessarily depart from an understanding that we are *always already* involved and located within the social processes we research, through direct involvement, or by virtue of existing in a social relationship to the research subject because our subject positions always impact upon how we interpret the world we live and research in. This research thread looks at the problems and proposals developed by movements and others as vital processes of knowledge production themselves, and argues for forms of research and writing that make the experience of positionality not a point of arrival, but a point of departure. Such an approach proposes an openness to change through precisely the encounters from which the research emerges, interrogating the possibilities of new connections and involving communities at the level of their self-organisation and self-representation, yet not fearful of disjuncture or of conflict.

The contributions of 'non-state' and 'civil society' actors along the supposed smooth plane of governance, are recognised more and more in the policy process. Yet, the question of policy as a terrain of struggle, and the power differentials that structure the policy process raise important questions about the possibilities for achieving emancipatory social and political transformation. Critical investigations often seek to uncover how the status quo of power is materially secured and reproduced, as well as rendered objective, neutral or natural, i.e. legitimised. However, whilst the critique of power in all its facets and manifestations is important and useful, if it is not analysed in conjunction with the active role that the subjects of power play, it renders them - whether inadvertently or not - absent and/or passive. There have of course also been many studies of resistance and of social movements. The kind of knowledge that is produced with an attention to resistance is able to address the productive role that these confrontational forces have, thereby unearthing the active subjects of resistance in the context of their material practices of invention and their relationship to policy. Our understanding of policy is informed not by the field of policy studies, strictly understood, but more precisely as a cultural-political field in which policies are not simply effected by the legal and political entities of the traditionally 'political', but also the sites of struggle over the meanings, norms and values that shape the cultural and social terrains.

There are three contributions to the research thread on *Mobilisations, Interventions and Cultural Policy* in this issue. *Urban Interventions* by Alexander Dellantonio, *Postcool* by Francesco Salvini, and *nanopolitics* by the nanopolitics group. *Urban Interventions* is a series of collages by Alexander Dellantonio that take the urban terrain with its rapid changes as the matrix of inquiry, presenting the artists reflections on the city. The strong colours used by the artist echo the city's images, places, people and situations and tattered billboard posters and manifestos torn off the buildings the militants fly-posted them on are reassembled to show the city and its inhabitants in movement. Dellantonio appropriates parts of the city and seeks to return them to the spectator. In so doing, these works not only engage the urban terrain as a space of politics, they also raise questions about mediation in the context of the current crisis of political representation that is being expressed by movements across the world, whether for example in Tahrir or Syntagma Square, at Occupy Wall Street or during the public sector strikes in the UK. Gavin Grindon and Begum Özden Firat provide commentaries on the *Urban Interventions* series, offering their reflections on Dellantonio's work. In the text *Postcool*, Francesco Salvini asks what it means to translate the categories of postcolonial thought in the practices of organisation of a subaltern neighbourhood trapped in the hurricane of valorisation and abstraction of urban space. Salvini presents an analysis of what he calls an 'audio-visual inquiry' conducted by a collective of political activists organising in the Raval in Barcelona. The laboratory of Postcool sought to find ways to learn about the subaltern histories of the Raval that are made invisible. Salvini discusses the ways in which the collective investigated how these subaltern histories of the Raval inscribe themselves in the urban design of the city in their relevance for organising against gentrification in the context

of postcolonial capitalism. A commentary on Salvini's analysis of the audi-visual inquiry of *Postcool* is provided by Sandro Mezzadra. The final text originates from a London-based collective, the nanopolitics group. The nanopolitics group formed around a desire to think politics with and through the body, organising movement-, theatre- and somatic based workshops and discussions. Using the term 'nanopolitics' to describe a political engagement that is attentive to the body, the nanopolitics group engage in a first reflection about their project in the text that appears here. They pose a series of questions that emerged from the project and engage in a collective reflection on their work with the body and movement, making a first foray into theorising their practice and its relevance.

All of the contributions engage the themes of this research thread on *Mobilisations, Interventions and Cultural Policy* in their own specific ways. Where Dellantonio is concerned with reassembling the remnants of different commercial and political interventions into urban space to articulate movement and encounter in the city, Salvini offers us a reflection of his group's quest to find an appropriate form of political practice as both mobilisation of, and intervention into, the urban space. Both pieces speak to the way in which this research thread aims to problematise the abstractions of cultural policy, reframing attention to the sites of struggle over the meanings, norms and values that shape the cultural and social terrains. The nanopolitics group shifts our attention to the body and its affective dimensions. Their text offers the body as a site traversed by the concerns of this research thread. There are four themes that weave their way through the three contributions. First, there is concern with intervention - intervention into the politics and practices of social movements and intervention into the academy and its traditions of knowledge production. Second, each text is situated firmly within a recognition and appreciation of social movements as knowledge producers. Third, all three contributions are unequivocally located in an urban context and the contemporary condition of inhabiting the city. Finally, what emerges from each reflection is a commitment to militant research and practice, as one that keeps ever-present an awareness of the relationship of research to existing material social relations of power and a commitment to confronting and transforming these very relations.

The curators of Lateral's research thread on *Mobilisations, Interventions and Cultural Policy* are Emma Dowling, Michal Osterweil, Manuela Bojadzijeve and Erika Biddle. The contributions to this issue were curated and edited by Emma Dowling. Contact: [lateralmobilisations@gmail.com](mailto:lateralmobilisations@gmail.com).